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Turner under congressional fire

Congressional concern over the loss of the U.S. intelligence sites in Iran descended like an avalanche last week on CIA Director Stansfield Turner.

At a closed meeting of the Senate Intelligence Committee, Turner had to bear the full weight of senatorial skepticism regarding the American capacity to monitor Soviet missile tests now that access to the Iranian sites is gone. After the meeting, several senators called the White House to complain that Turner had made a weak case worse by his inability to answer pertinent questions.

In fairness to Turner, he was not given a strong hand to play. Primarily for budgetary reasons, the Carter administration decided not to ask for the full amount required in the next fiscal year for a crash program aimed at rebuilding our monitoring capacity.

The senators demanded that about \$50 million be added to speed construction of the new satellite surveillance system which, when completed, should restore most of our ability to observe Russian missile testing.

The hard questioning to which Turner was subjected by a group of senators led by Sen. Henry Jackson, D-Wash., reflected a conviction among well-informed members of Congress that the administration has been less than candid in admitting the full extent of the Iranian loss. President Carter has given assurances that our verification capability can be easily restored, but some senators insist the president was either misinformed or guilty of misleading the public.

When the administration failed to ask for the funds they feel are urgently needed to repair the damage, these senators saw added proof of Carter's underestimation of the danger. They point out that if SALT is defeated, the U.S. will be even more dependent on accurate monitoring of Russian missile testing in order to pace its own development of new weapons in a wide-open nuclear competition.

In responding to these skeptics, Turner suffered under a self-imposed handicap. Unlike former CIA directors who were always accompanied at such sessions by at least one scientific expert, Turner brought along only his legislative aide and a black briefing book.

His refusal to take advantage of expert advice is typical of Turner's extreme self-confidence. He appears to believe he can handle the most complex matters on his own.

In this case, the briefing book soon ran out of answers and Turner is reported to have been at a loss for explanations as the senators probed the loopholes in our verification capability. The Democrats led the critical assault, while Republicans like Barry Goldwater, R-Ariz., sat back and watched their work being done for them.

Two days after this session, a high-level meeting was called together in the White House to reconsider administration strategy. The group included Turner and OMB chief James McIntyre.

Shocked into an awareness of how serious the senators view any time lag in repairing our monitoring ability, the participants agreed to add the extra millions requested by the senators. An attempt will be made to explain that the figures used

This climb-down in the face of senatorial concern is not going to restore Turner's credibility in the minds of some senators and staff members. They feel he is too close to the White House to be objective and not sufficiently well-informed to play a solo role as principal administration spokesman on the verification issue. As one senator who is a member of the Intelligence Committee put it, "There is sentiment building up within the committee that Turner is not equal to the task."

Caught amidst mounting pressures, Turner made a speech here last Friday in which he attempted to take himself out of the line of fire by making a distinction between "monitoring" and "verification." He argued that it was the CIA's task to monitor Soviet activity in relation to each provision of the SALT treaty, but that policymakers, not the CIA, must verify compliance by deciding whether changes discovered by the CIA violate the treaty.

This semantic distinction will not satisfy either opponents or supporters of the treaty. One White House staffer called it sophistical, and a Senate staffer remarked that senators will expect from Turner a clear answer as to whether the treaty is sufficiently verifiable to be ratified.

Turner's best hope is to abandon his Lone Ranger role and rely more heavily on the competence of CIA experts. Congress wants from him an institutional judgment that is scrupulously objective and factually accurate. Both supporters and critics of SALT can ask for no more than that.